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AUTHOR Soven, Margot
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ABSTRACT

College freshmen, when confronted with an essay question using broad concepts such as "society," "freedom," and "progress," seldom clarify or define the concepts in their essays before expressing their opinions or solutions. Students who read without interpreting the concepts implied by certain words shortchange the author, and students who write without examining the content of their propositions shortchange their audiences. Language analysis can help eliminate this problem because it specifies a set of operations that the students can learn to perform, such as generating model cases, contrary cases, and borderline cases. Students must first learn to appreciate the need for clarification. Propositions from assigned readings must be examined, after which students can be taught to devise model cases that definitely are described by the word in question. Once they begin to see the possible range of meaning implied by a word, they can return to their own propositions and evaluate them. They will also begin to recognize words in need of clarification in the literature they read. Following these guidelines, students in a one-semester course were taught language analysis skills. As a result, they demonstrated increasing skill at recognizing words in need of clarification and used this skill in preparing their essays. (HTH)

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Margot Soven
La Salle College

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Language Analysis: Critical Reading and Writing--What's the Connection?

"Should people in mental asylums ever be punished?"

"Is freedom important for an individual in society?"

"Is progress inevitable in the twentieth century?"

These questions are very much like those addressed in freshman essays. What do they have in common? They are all what John Wilson, author of a small book used in British schools for instruction in language analysis, calls "mixed questions." Mixed questions require several kinds of responses, a response dealing initially with the clarification of concepts embedded within the question as well as a response in the form of a statement of opinion.[1]

What do typical freshmen do when they are confronted with such questions? Do they ponder in a systematic way the problems involved in answering them? Do they realize that before they offer their opinions they should ask "What do the words 'punishment,' 'freedom' and 'progress' mean in the context in which they are being used?" Do they understand that they must spend some effort interpreting the meaning of the question before answering it?

In my experience, they do not. Instead, the freshmen in my classes rush headlong into statements of opinion, and in the more satisfying papers I receive, they support those opinions with reasons and sometimes examples. But, because my students offer their opinions with only a hazy image of the meaning of the question, their responses

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are often simplistic and do not address issues that emerge only when the concepts within the questions are fully explored.

We can assume that the same freshmen who do not realize the need for clarifying the meaning of mixed questions before they answer them receive only a fraction of the meaning embedded in the texts they read. We need go no further than a class discussion, after an essay has been assigned for reading, to confirm our suspicions. Just recently one of my classes read the frequently anthologized essay, "The Dying Family" by John Harold Plumb.[2] Many of my students (average freshmen) missed Plumb's point because they did not pause long enough to reflect on his discussion about our present use of the word "family." My students said that Plumb thinks the family is dying, that we no longer value the institution "family." They drew this conclusion because they ignored his distinction between an old-fashioned concept of "family" consisting of husband, wife, and children, and a modern concept of "family" embracing a wider variety of relationships.

To continue our tale of woe, about the much maligned freshman just a little further, these same students who read inadequately write essays about "education," "society," "failure," "success," and "disillusionment" without clarifying the meaning of these words. Occasionally we do see an effort. Somewhere these students have heard that they must define their terms, and, as a result, they insert a dictionary definition in their papers, a definition which may or may not be closely related to the main point of their discussion, and which may, in fact, ironically serve to block the potential complexity

of their own ideas. For example, one of my students writing about the values of the characters in The Great Gatsby defines "value" as a "principle or quality intrinsically valuable." The student fails to realize that a dictionary definition is of little help in clarifying the concepts implied by the word "value." He inserts the definition because he is blindly following a rule, not realizing that his definition is pointless.

Students who read without interpreting the concepts implied by certain words shortchange the author. They ignore what Richard Larson calls "... the content of a proposition, the range of possible statements, the words used in propositions might make, the premises it takes for granted, the judgements it may imply..."[3] Students who write without examining the content of their propositions shortchange their audiences. They omit the clarifying remarks their audience needs to understand fully what they are trying to say. But, perhaps of even greater concern to us as teachers whose goals include helping students to better understand their own ideas, is that these students shortchange themselves. They never confront the range of possible ideas to be gotten from their reading or which might be included in their writing.

How do we as English teachers respond to this problem? Ironically, our instruction is often composed of comments that are paradigms of the problem itself. For example, the teachers who find their students' interpretations of assigned reading inadequate may say, "You should have analyzed the material more thoroughly, you should have read the

text more critically." The teachers who discover unclarified propositions in their students' essays may write in the margin, "Needs explaining!" or perhaps, and even less helpful, "Lacks clarity!" The phrases "Analyze more thoroughly," "Read more critically," "Needs explaining," and "Lacks clarity" each imply a variety of possible activities that often remain unspecified, not because teachers are lazy or intentionally vague, but because they do not know what to tell the student to do. As Mina Shaughnessy says, we have not learned how to teach our students to perform consciously language-related activities that we ourselves perform intuitively.

Language analysis can help us because it specifies a set of operations that the student can learn to perform. Language analysis has its philosophical basis in the work of the so-called ordinary language and Oxford philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin. They suggested that the only reasonable way of looking at language is to analyze the way it is used. Dictionary definitions can serve only when the word is in a context in which it has a precise definition, for example, a scientific context. John Wilson uses the word "work" to demonstrate this phenomena. He says,

> If we are asked what is work in an examination on mechanics, we know that we have to give the textbook definition. But that is because mechanics is a highly evolved and reasonably precise science....If we are asked what is work in a general paper for a university examination, however, our approach would be different. We should start thinking about the concept of work as it is used in everyday life... and in everyday life there is no definition of work. We should have to notice various uses of the word, the different meanings it bears in different contexts...[5]

We can analyze the concept using one or more of a variety of techniques. These include, amongst other language analysis techniques, generating model cases, contrary cases, and borderline cases.

In a one semester course in freshman composition there is time to introduce only a few of these techniques; like other language related skills, language analysis must be practiced a great deal before its techniques are mastered. In a graduate course in language analysis offered at the University of Pennsylvaria the techniques are introduced during the first several weeks. No additional material is added after the fifth week. The rest of the semester is spent practicing the techniques.

Before instruction in the techniques can begin, students must learn to appreciate the need for clarification. This takes practice. It is not all obvious to them that the word "society" must be clarified, that the term "education" has a wide range of possible meanings. Many propositions must be examined from assigned readings as well as from a student's own writing before most students recognize those words in greatest need of clarification. Then they can be taught to devise model cases, instances which can definitely be described by the word in question. After they have learned to generate model cases, students begin to see the possible range of meaning implied by some words. Then they return to their own propositions and evaluate them in light of what they have discovered about the words contained in them. Perhaps they will modify their statements as a result of their analysis. For example, if the student has said, "Education is important

in our society," he may realize after clarifying "education" and "society" that what he really means is "formal education is important if you want a good job." By clarifying the concepts "education" and "society" he discovers that they embrace more ideas than he had intended to explore. Furthermore, he realizes that he must explain what he means by "education" and "society."

Similarly, after language analysis practice, students should begin to recognize words in need of clarification in the literature they read and remain alert to contextual clues serving that purpose. In Writing About Reading Daniel Howard says, "An educated person with an inquisitive mind reads accurately but with the widest prespective. 'Taxes' is not for him a simple word that produces an unthinking response (terrible, too high already) but a word with many possible meanings and implications all of which he considers in an attempt to understand precisely what is said. Sometimes the context provides the answers to the reader's questions, sometimes the source is inadequate."[6] Students should learn to recognize the implications of an inadequate clarification. Perhaps the author is trying to get us to agree with him by being intentionally vague, a motive not rare in what Richard Ohman calls the language shaped by advertisers and corporate experts who are anxious to channel our thoughts, feelings and needs.

What are the returns--the benefits of introducing language analysis in a one semester course? I can give a preliminary answer on the basis of my experience teaching a one semester course I designed as part of my dissertation. I included weekly instruction in

language analysis skills and students were required to complete a set of exercises based on that instruction. The results were interesting from several points of view.

When asked if language analysis practice had made them aware of the need to clarify their words, the students unanimously responded in the affirmative. This, of course, was no surprise. However, the students did indeed demonstrate increasing skill in recognizing words in need of clarification and in performing language analysis exercises. This increasing awareness of the need for language clarification was transmitted to their essays in a curious way. Shorter essays (500 words) contained little language clarification per se; on the other hand, these essays contained few words in need of clarification, in marked contrast to essays of similar length written at the beginning of the semester. Apparently the students realized, consciously or not, that short essays were not the place in which to deal with abstract terms. On the other hand, longer essays (1000 words) did include efforts at language clarification, although these efforts fell short of language analysis skills demonstrated in the exercises.

There are several possible explanations for the disparity between skills demonstrated in exercises and the essays.

1. The course design did not provide sufficient opportunity for language clarification practice in the context of the students' own essays. Perhaps there would have been greater carry over of the use of language clarification techniques into the students' writing if instruction had been based on the students' essays.

2. There is insufficient time during a one-semester course in which language analysis is only one instructional component for students to demonstrate more than awareness and perhaps improvement, as opposed to mastery, of the skill.

I made no effort to determine whether language analysis instruction had an effect on students' ability to read critically, since the course in which I introduced this instruction is designated strictly as a writing course. With the aid of a reading spedialist at the University of Pennsylvania I plan to develop a scheme for evaluating the impact of language analysis instruction on critical reading ability. I believe that it is worthwhile to continue to explore ways of introducing students to a system of looking at language that may influence both their reading and writing.

Footnotes

1. John Wilson, Thinking With Concepts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 23.

2. J. H. Plumb, "The Dying Family," Little Brown Reader.

3. Richard H. Larson, "Discovery Through Questioning," Contemporary Rhetoric, ed. W. Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), p. 147.

4. Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.92

5. Wilson, p. 11.

6. Daniel Howard, Writing About Reading (New York: Little Brown and Co., 1965), p. 6.

7. Richard Ohman, "Use Definite, Specific Concrete Language," College English, 4 (Dec. 1979), p.48